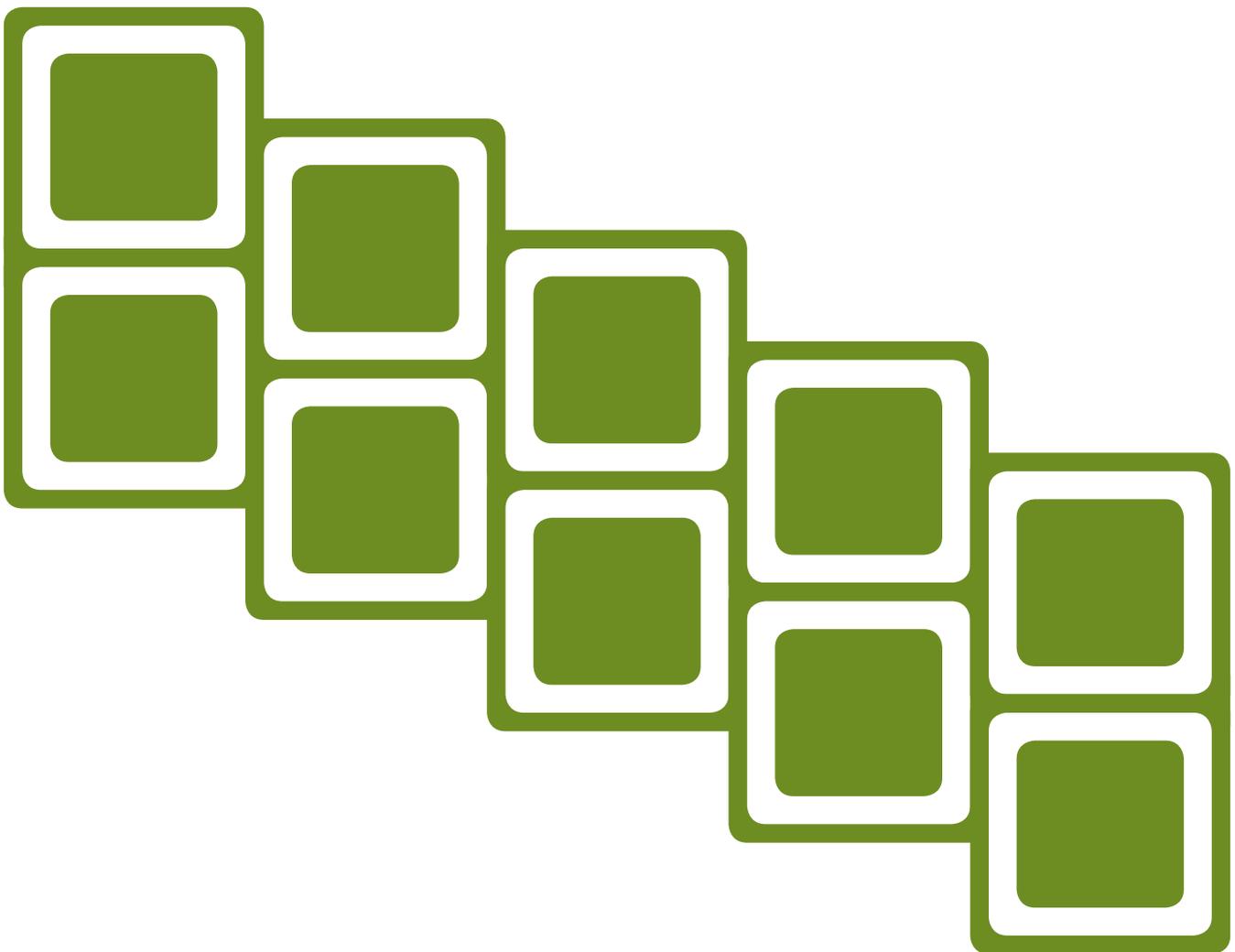


Summer Academe
Best Practices

Fall 2017



Launching a Signature Summer Event

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Abstract

The 2017 launch of the award-winning Rutgers – New Brunswick Writers’ Conference illustrates the steps in developing a sustainable signature program that serves the needs of students, the institution, and the regional public. Needs assessment, program design and staffing, marketing, financial management, and program evaluation are addressed, and recommendations for applying this model to other events and programs are offered.

Goals

Winner of the 2017 North American Association of Summer Sessions (NAASS) Creative and Innovative Noncredit Program – Large Institution award, the inaugural Rutgers – New Brunswick Writers’ Conference was designed as a signature event to inspire student writers and help them to polish their craft and publish their work. More broadly, we also hoped to foster greater student engagement on the summer campus and build goodwill with our academic colleagues and the regional community. In this article, we describe the program development, marketing, financial management, and evaluation processes used in launching this new program, and we make recommendations for applying them to other signature programs at peer institutions.

Program Development

Environmental Scanning

Our first objective was to determine whether New Jersey needed a writers’ conference. A web search turned up several specialized events on writing romance, suspense/mystery, and poetry—and one, at Rutgers, on teaching writing. But there were no broad events of the sort we envisioned nearer than New York City or Philadelphia.

Assessing Market Demand

In January 2016, we surveyed Rutgers students, faculty and staff members, Rutgers Osher Lifelong Learning Institute members, and members of regional writers’ groups to determine the demand for a new writers’ conference in Central Jersey. A total of 1,537 writers responded, ranging from aspirants (48.22%) to professionals (6.78%). Survey results indicated:

- More than half (50%) would be interested in attending a writers’ conference at Rutgers, and nearly as many (45%) “may be” interested. Only 5% said that they wouldn’t be interested—but on further questioning, 41% of these individuals explained that they “would need to know more” before they could say whether they would be interested. In essence, nearly all respondents were or might be interested in attending a writers’ conference at Rutgers.
- The top benefits respondents wanted from conference attendance were:
 - improved writing skills (79%)
 - inspiration as a writer (68%)
 - information on how to get published (64%)
 - better editing skills (63%)
 - connections with other writers for continuing support and critique (63%)

- Workshop topics in which respondents expressed greatest interest were:
 - writing creative fiction (66%)
 - getting published (62%)
 - writing creative nonfiction (43%)
 - writing for the web (33%)
 - writing for teens (32%)
 - writing poetry (31%)
 - writing for children (26%)
 - writing plays/screenplays (25%)

Survey respondents identified June as the best month for the proposed event and favored a weekend rather than a one-day or week-long conference. Four hundred and sixty (460) respondents volunteered to help us plan the event.

During the month of February, we conducted four focus group interviews with groups of 8 to 12 volunteers to clarify and expand on the survey results and sketch a program plan. From these interview groups we invited 20 writers to serve as advisory board members, guiding program development over the next 14 months.

Working with Advisory Board

Advisory board members were selected to represent a broad range of writers, from aspirant authors to published professionals, writing in different genres. We met monthly, March 2016 through May 2017, to:

- design the program structure
- identify workshop topics
- select keynote candidates, workshop leaders, and publishing professionals
- plan and implement the marketing campaign for the inaugural conference, scheduled for June 2–4, 2017.

Advisory board members had two primary roles: to help us understand what writers would want from the conference, and to help us share information about the program through their own writing networks. We took their advice seriously, but ultimately the decisions and responsibility were ours.

To avoid conflicts of interest, advisory board members were ineligible to present at the event. However, many of our board members served as speaker “handlers” and introducers during the conference.

Offering a Credit-Bearing Option

Our English Department writing program coordinator was a key partner in planning our program. She recommended published instructors to conduct conference workshops and arranged a credit option for student participants.

Summer Session students could earn 1.5 academic credits for their participation in the conference by registering for Introduction to Literary Studies through the Rutgers – New Brunswick English Department. Receiving a final letter grade for this course required submission, revision, and resubmission of a manuscript, full attendance at the conference, and meetings with the instructor.

Presenters

We selected novelist Dennis Lehane as our keynote speaker and singer/songwriter Janis Ian as concert performer/workshop leader, based on name recognition, reputation, quality of written work, public-speaking ability, and speaker fees. The rest of the writing workshop leader and lecturer positions were filled with local authors and faculty members from our own English Department's writing program. All presenters had been published in at least one form or genre, and all were experienced in teaching writing at the university level or speaking on their subjects at conferences and public events.

Publishers, editors, and literary agents were recruited based on word-of-mouth recommendations from speakers and advisory board members, and through cold calls to established publishing houses and literary agencies.

The Program

The program began with a Friday evening concert, featuring a solo performance by Ms. Ian. She also led two workshops during the conference, one on songwriting and the other on writing autobiography.

On Saturday, the conference itself began with a keynote presentation by Mr. Lehane, followed by six concurrent tracks of workshops and lectures on writing fiction, genre fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and for performance, and on the business of writing. At lunch, we offered several activities to meet the needs of writers at different stages of development:

- for advanced writers, a Pitch Slam (a structured exercise in which participating writers pitch their manuscripts to a series of publishing professionals)
- for less experienced writers, the choice of a Publishing 101 workshop taught by a veteran literary agent, or informal networking.

Workshops and lectures ended at 5:30 p.m., and attendees had dinner on their own. At 7:30 p.m., we reassembled for an authors' reading event, featuring Lehane, Ian, poet Mark Doty, and television critic David Bianculli.

Sunday began with a free-writing exercise led by a veteran writing instructor from our own English department, followed again by concurrent tracks of workshops and lectures. At lunch, a panel of three publishers responded to attendees' questions about publishing options. Afternoon workshops and lectures ended at 4:30 p.m., followed by a one-hour reading event showcasing our attendees' work to close the program.

Throughout both days, writers who had manuscripts ready could sign up for 10-minute individual appointments with publishers, editors, and literary agents to discuss their work.

Marketing

Concert and conference marketing began in fall 2016 and continued through May 2017. The integrated campaign of print, digital, and social media advertising included:

- website (ruwriterscon.rutgers.edu)
- Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram content
- Facebook and Google advertising
- online Patch content
- targeted email messages
- print brochure and posters
- print and online Writers' Magazine ads
- press releases and a presenters' media kit
- RUTV spot
- Rutgers e-publications
- National Public Radio (NPR) radio advertising
- advisory board members' own writers' networks
- flyers and e-flyers
- the Core radio station on the Rutgers – New Brunswick campus

In addition, the kick-off concert was marketed through Pandora radio ads and an interview on a Princeton folk music radio show.

Financial Management

Funding Model

We understood from the beginning that the kind of program we wanted to offer, featuring well-known and critically acclaimed authors, would cost more than we could reasonably charge our target audience. A small portion of the annual Summer Session student activity fee revenue was allocated to defray speaker fees for the conference.

Rutgers Summer Session students (who paid Summer Session Student Activity Fees) were charged reduced conference and concert registration fees that covered the cost of their meals and coffee service and assured their attendance.

Pricing and Registration

Pricing for the concert and conference varied by participant status:

Audience	Concert (mezzanine / orchestra)	Conference
Rutgers Students	\$10 / \$20	\$49
Rutgers Faculty / Staff	\$29 / \$49	\$199
Public	\$49 / \$69	\$299

Conference registration included all workshops, keynote and lectures, evening reading events, meetings with publishing professionals, participant bags and handouts, parking, Saturday breakfast, lunches, evening reading event refreshments, and coffee service throughout the conference.

Two hundred twenty-five (225) individuals attended the Janis Ian concert, and 172 writers participated in the Rutgers – New Brunswick Writers’ Conference. Of these, 38 were Rutgers matriculated students, of whom three earned academic credit for their participation.

Costs and Revenue

The total cost of the 2017 concert and conference was \$84,116. Fifty-eight percent of the cost was covered by concert and conference registration fees (\$48,565); the remaining 42% (\$35,551) was subsidized through Summer Session student activity fees.

Evaluation

Eighty-seven participants (51% of attendees) completed and submitted evaluation surveys as they left the conference on Sunday evening. They rated their experience highly:

- Extent to which participating in the conference helped them to meet their goals: mean 4.18 on a five-point scale.
- Overall value of the conference to them: mean 4.31 on a five-point scale.
- Over 96% of respondents expressed interest in attending next year's conference.

Some of the comments collected on the survey form:

- "It was amazing to meet aspiring and published writers to have really stimulating conversations with them and swap ideas."
- "Excellent concept; very good execution, courteous customer relationships. Great job/great service!"
- "I am so glad to come to this well-organized, professional, informative, and above all, honest Writers' Conference. Highly recommended."

Participants suggested adding breakfast on Sunday, offering more advanced sessions for experienced writers, and increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of our presenters. We will incorporate these recommendations into our 2018 program, along with other enhancements:

- Add a morning keynote speaker on Sunday to keep energy and attendance high throughout the conference.
- Revamp the Pitch Slam for greater value to participants and observers.
- Require morning presenters to arrive the night before and afternoon presenters to arrive for lunch, to protect against late session starts.
- Reschedule the Saturday evening reading event for just after the final workshop to avoid dinnertime attrition.
- Require submission of a manuscript prior to individual meetings with agents/editors/publishers, to make meetings more meaningful.
- Promote the credit option earlier in the marketing season so that more students can participate.
- Secure vendor(s) for the event to underwrite program costs.

The June 1–3, 2018, program will begin with a Friday evening conversation with Broadway composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim and will feature novelists Alice Hoffman and Chris Bohjalian as keynote speakers.

Recommendations

We recommend key elements of the model we used for our writers' conference to other institutions interested in launching their own signature programs or events, regardless of the specific content of their projects:

- **Environmental scanning** – Begin by determining whether the program you would like to offer is already available in the local region and at what price point.
- **Assessing market demand** – Conduct prospective participant surveys to identify programming of interest to your target audiences.
- **Working with advisory boards** – Advisory boards that represent the populations you hope to serve can be helpful in designing a desirable program and in marketing the program through their own communication networks.
- **Partnering with an academic unit** – Work with an academic department to identify speakers, provide a credit option for your student participants, and build good will by providing a revenue stream for the academic unit.
- **Funding for sustainability** – By using additional sources of funding to defray costs, you can establish and sustain an annual signature event at price points that are attractive to both students and the public. You may want to consider using student fees, grants, and/or vendor sponsors to subsidize costs or provide scholarships for participants with financial need.

Biography

Elizabeth Beasley, director of Summer and Special Projects for the Rutgers Division of Continuing Studies, oversees the Rutgers-New Brunswick Summer and Winter Sessions, and develops special programs for domestic and international precollege and university students and professionals. She returned to Rutgers in 2007 after 13 years serving California State University, Sacramento, as program director, development director, and director of self-support programs. Beasley earned a bachelors' in psychology from Rutgers and a master's and doctoral candidacy in social psychology from Northwestern.